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VOICES AT MOTHER'S KITCHEN:
An Autoethnographic Account of Exile
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Abstract:

In this article, I use an autoethnographic approach and draw on my memory to relive my interactions with my mother and my wife together with my experiences before my arrival to the U.S. My writing is an attempt to understand my departure from Cuba and my relationship with my mother and my wife. I discuss concepts of collective unconsciousness and the reluctant immigrant and how the historically constituted power relations define the identity of Cuban exiles. I highlight the battle of the politics of passion and the politics of affection—two polar opposites. As the politics of affection undermine the goals of the politics of passion, the moral imperative of *what ought to be* is not achieved and becomes an antecedent to exile.

Tampa, Florida
March 11, 2002

The early morning sun breaks through the kitchen windows. Two windows are to my right. One is behind me. The horizontal awnings that provide privacy from the street and the neighbors next door help to diffuse the soft rays of the sun around the kitchen and into the living room. I inhale the pungent aroma of the Cuban coffee mother places in front of me. Mother's hesitant voice breaks my trance:

Tu hermano me llamó ayer.
Your brother called yesterday

¿Qué te dijo?
What did he tell you?

Te mandó recuerdos. No sé porqué vive allá tan lejos en Los Angeles.

He sent his regards. I don't know why he lives so far away in Los Angeles.

I nod. The same question often enters my mind. He should be here. Mother needs him. He never married and could live with her, help take care of her. He knows she does not want a stranger living with her. He knows she does not want to move in with me or anyone else. She wants to stay in her house until the day she dies.

As I lower my cup, my eyes land on the large, earth-colored, ceramic bowl serving as a centerpiece for the kitchen table. A cupped lid covers the oblong center and holds four open sections together. Mother's voice brings me back from my thoughts.

Dice que pensaba venir. No sé porqué razón no vive aquí conmigo.

He said he plans to visit. I don't know why he doesn't live here.

Vieja, él se acostumbró a vivir independientemente después que salió de Cuba.

*Vieja,*¹ he got used to his independence after he left Cuba, I respond.

No, lo cambió el desengaño que recibió. Sus amigos de la milicia, los que estudiaron con él en la Unión Soviética, y los líderes y compañeros del trabajo lo ignoraron cuando enfermó y casi muere. Ninguno de ellos fue a verlo en el hospital o se interesó por él. Nunca se recuperó del desengaño que recibió de tantas personas

¹ The literal translation of the word "vieja" is old maid. However, when used as I do here, it's a term of endearment for which I can't offer an English translation.

identificadas con Castro y su régimen. Sintió que lo abandonaron porque ya no podía ser útil a la causa Castrista. Después de la experiencia no quiso depender de nadie. Hasta se alejó de la familia.

No, his disappointment changed him. His friends in the militia, those that studied with him in the Soviet Union and the leaders and coworkers at work ignored him when he was sick and nearly died. No one went to see him at the hospital or inquired about him. He felt they abandoned him because he was no longer useful to Castro's regime. After the experience, he didn't want to depend on anyone. He even distanced himself from the family.

As I listen to my mother, my eyes are fixed on the three, dime-size, black marble stones resting in one of the four outer sections of the earth-colored, ceramic bowl at the center of the table. My right index finger circles the top of the water glass sitting on top of the transparent plastic protecting the embroidered tablecloth.

Tú también simpatizaste con Castro, pero no te uniste a la milicia. Comprendiste más temprano la realidad de lo que sucedía. Tú siempre fuiste más inteligente y responsable. Por eso, cuando nos dijiste que venías para los Estados Unidos, no nos opusimos. Though you sympathized with Castro, you did not join the militia. You understood earlier the reality of what was going on. You've always been brighter and more responsible. Thus, when you told us about coming to the U.S., we did not object.

My eyes are fixed on the earth-colored, ceramic bowl at the center of the kitchen table. I think about José, our childhood. Mother's words bring back memories of Cuba; what brought me to the U.S., a story that began on a cool March morning fifty years ago.

* * * *

***10 de marzo de 1952
La Habana, Cuba***

Father's voice wakes me. I notice my brother José is not in our bed. My parents' bed is

empty. Father's voice travels through the doorway that connects our apartment's bedroom to the living-dining room area. I sit up and listen closely.

. . .*suspendieron las clases José viene conmigo a la panadería.*
. . .classes were canceled. José is coming with me to the bakery.

I see mother standing by the entrance to the kitchen. A thick aroma races up my nostrils and arouses my senses. The strong smell comes from a coffee pot I can't see. Mother's body blocks the sight, but not the rhythmic sound of boiling coffee dancing inside the coffee pot. José stands next to mother. Their eyes are fixed on father. Father's face is solemn. His lips move fast and chop the ending off the words escaping from his mouth. He is upset. I do not ask why. Instead, I tell him I want to go with them to the bakery. When he agrees to let me go, I dress in a hurry.

As we reach the sidewalk, I feel an unusual dryness in the air. The first signs of light press on the night sky. We move at a brisk pace. *Santa Rosa*, the street facing our apartment building, is deserted. The pungent aroma of freshly ground coffee embraces the air as we walk by *El Industrial*, the coffee mill next door. At the intersection of *Concepción*, I notice *La Farmacéutica Roca* [a drugstore], *El Paraíso* [a food stand], *el puesto Elías* [*Elías's* fruit and vegetable stand], and *la bodega del chino Neno* [a Chinaman's, Neno, grocery store] are closed. I do not see anyone on the front porches around *la manzana de Pellón* [a city block of attached houses named Pellón].

When we reach the intersection of *General Lee*, soldiers move along the high concrete wall surrounding the approach to the main entrance to *Campamento Columbia*, at the time Cuba's

largest military garrison. The solemn soldiers' faces peer out of steel helmets. They carry rifles close to their hearts. Their left hands are tightly wrapped around the bottom of the black shining barrels. Their right hands embrace the hammers; their index fingers, the triggers. I grab father's left hand.

No te preocupes.
Don't worry.

My father's voice does not free me from fear. I move closer to him.

When we enter *la panadería Reina* [the bakery], father immediately joins the murmuring coming from the two men facing each other across the counter. I want to know what is going on. I pay attention to their words.

. . . tumbaron al gobierno de Prío. Batista ha dado un golpe de estado.
. . . Prío's government was toppled. Batista forged *a coupe d'état*.

I had finished grammar school. I knew the words, but I didn't have a clue as to what they meant. Something was not right. That's what I knew and felt. Or so it seems to me every time I think about it now.

* * * *

Tampa, Florida
November 7, 2002

Robertico llamó. Hablé con Amparito y Daisy.
Robertico called. I talked with Amparito and Daisy.

As soon as I walk into her kitchen, mother mentions another phone call, this time from her nephew Robertico living in Spain with Amparito, mother's sister, and her daughter Daisy,

mother's niece.

¿Cómo están?

How are they?

Dice que bien. Están tratando de venir Yo quiero que vivan aquí conmigo.

He said they're fine. They're trying to come over. I want them to live here with me.

As I listen to her words, I look at mother's thin gray hair, her glasses—now too big for her face. The pointed dried growth to the right of her nose, just below her right eye and visible through her lenses, reminds me to make a doctor's appointment to remove it. I move my eyes away from mother's face as I open the horizontal awnings preventing the early morning sun from joining us. The smell of Cuban coffee again fills my nostrils. Sabina, who recently started to look after mother, stands by the stove and pours the rich brew into a small purple bulb-shaped cup mother set aside for me a long time ago. Like mother, she pours the thick black liquid to the top of the cup. Sabina looks at mother and, using mother's nickname, asks,

¿Cuca, quieres café?

Cuca, do you want coffee?

¡Tú sabes que yo nunca le digo que no al café!

You know I never say no to coffee!

Since father's death in 1996 (Cotanda, 2001a), mother has lived alone. She does not want to move out of her house or allow anyone who is not a member of the family to move in with her. Currently, there is not a family member able or willing to do it. I've always wondered whether this is a way for mother to assert her independence. She never lived alone. A few weeks earlier, when I told her Sabina was coming to help around the house a few hours each day, mother rejected the idea and insisted that

Tu padre no quería extraños en la casa.
Your father did not want strangers in the house.

Undaunted, I asked Sabina to come. Now, a few weeks later, when I ask mother,

¿Doña Eumelia, quiere que le diga a Sabina que no venga más?
Doña Eumelia, do you want me to tell Sabina not to come again?

She is quick in her response,

No, no, ella es muy buena conmigo. Yo no tengo que decirle que haga nada. Es mi amiga. Yo la quiero mucho
No, no, she is very good to me. I don't need to tell her to do anything. She's my friend. I love her very much.

Mother is pleased with Sabina, but continues to wait for her sister Amparito, her nephew Robertico, and her niece Daisy to arrive from Spain. She wants them to live in her house as long as they want.

Ellos van a necesitar algún lugar donde vivir cuando lleguen. Yo quiero que vengan a vivir conmigo. Después que yo me muera, tú los dejas vivir aquí todo el tiempo que quieran. Todo lo que tienen que hacer es mantener la casa, pagar los impuestos y el seguro.
They are going to need a place to stay when they arrive. I want them to stay with me. After I die, you let them stay here as long as they want. All they need to do is keep up the house, pay the taxes and the insurance.

Though mother's mind continues to deteriorate and her memory falters, she does not forget them. I wonder whether by the time they arrive she will be able to understand what is going on. At times, tears come to her eyes when she talks about the living, but never when she talks about death.

Cuando yo me muera, yo quiero que muevas los restos de mi padre y lo entierres al lado mío y de tu padre.
When I die, I want you to move my father's remains and bury

them next to me and your father.

The voice conveying the request is firm. It's the voice of one in a position of authority who knows the request will be fulfilled.

Tu padre compró seis terrenos en el cementerio, pero no sabía en cual de ellos lo iban a enterrar. Yo si. Mi nombre ya está puesto en la cabecera de la tumba, al lado del suyo.

Your father bought six cemetery lots, but didn't know in which one he'd be buried. I do. My name is already engraved in the headstone, next to his.

My eyes are fixed on the earth colored, ceramic bowl at the center of the kitchen table. I realize mother's voice now conveys the conviction of a person who has seen the future. It brings back memories of another voice, one that also foreshadowed a life-changing experience forty three years earlier. . .

* * * *

19 de marzo de 1959
La Habana, Cuba

Ya es hora de entrar a clases.
It's time to go to class.

It is early evening. We are standing in the hall next to the door to our classroom. My best friend Ramón looks past me as he raises his eyelids. His eyeballs begin to bulge and his lower lip drops. I hear the rhythmic sound of spiked high heels as it bounces off the ceramic tile floor. A female voice calls out my name.

Dionel . . . Dionel . . .

As I turn, a hand gently lands on my right shoulder. A stunning young woman stands next

to Margarita, a fellow student at *La Escuela de Publicidad de La Habana* [Havana's Marketing School].²

. . . *quiero presentarte a mi amiga Marina.* . . .
. . . I want you to meet my friend Marina. . .

Margarita's voice fades. I do not listen. Marina becomes the center of my attention. My eyes focus on her coquettish smile, sensuous lips, thick brown hair, and low-cut tight-fitting black dress. Thin white stripes accentuate the contours of a perfectly balanced female figure. Margarita tries to get my attention by tapping my shoulder.

Dionel. . . Dionel. . . Marina quiere ser periodista, pero la embullé para que viniera a participar en la clase de ésta noche. Dionel. . .
. Dionel. . . Marina wants to be a journalist, but I talked her into attending tonight's class.

Marina has Ramón's attention too. His eyes are fixed on her firm bust, which appears ready to burst free. He drools. I stare. During class that night, when she sits next to me, I find it difficult to concentrate on anything but Marina. My hands sweat. My mind throbs. My body shivers.

After class later that evening, Marina's voice punctures the crisp night air as she makes a point during a lengthy discussion about chaperons.

¡No creo en chaperonas! ¡Yo me puedo cuidar sola!
I don't believe in chaperons! I can take care of myself!

Her tone is firm. Her face conveys conviction. I still compete with Ramón for her attention. The glare of the street lights hides the stars shining in the night sky. The March air is

² *A few months later the government annexed it to La Universidad de La Habana [University of Havana].*

dry, clear. *Café Línea*, an outdoor *café* along *Avenida Línea*, a busy thoroughfare, provides the setting for our discussion. Unable to agree on the subject of chaperons, I decide to ask about Castro's promise on elections.

¿Por qué Fidel se compromete a elecciones tan pronto cuando hay tanto que hacer?

Why does Fidel commit himself to hold elections so soon when there is so much to do yet?

¡No sucederá! Castro no permitirá elecciones. Si sigues sus acciones no sólo podrás observar sus posiciones marxistas sino también que no permite opiniones que no encajen en las suyas.

It won't happen! Castro will not allow elections to take place. If you follow his actions, you'll notice not only his Marxist positions, but also his intolerance for points of view that do not fit within his.

Marina's vibrant voice ripples the air one more time. Much to my surprise, I discover she does not share my support for either the idea of chaperons or Castro's incipient revolution. She claims to be able to look after herself and does not trust Castro's promise to restore the 1940 Constitution. I find her independence refreshing, but her distrust unfounded.

A few days later I knock at Marina's door. When she opens the door to her apartment, my voice falters.

Margarita me dijo que viniera a recoger unos papeles del colegio que te dejó.

Margarita told me to pick up some school papers she left with you.

Marina seems surprised to see me.

No, ella no me dejó nada.

No, she did not leave anything.

Later, I confess my visit is only an excuse to see her again. My eyes resist moving away from her hourglass figure. Her smile tells me she likes the attention. When I ask her to go out, she agrees. The air around me glows. My legs tremble. My heart pounds. My head throbs.

A few days later, our first date finds us at *El Carmelo*, an outdoor *café* along *Calle 23*, a main thoroughfare leading to *La Rampa*, one of Havana's busiest commercial and entertainment districts not too far from the University of Havana. Over dinner, my eyes remain fixed on Marina as she mentions one more time her doubts about Castro.

*Mira, yo reconozco que la mayoría, incluyéndote a ti, apoya a Castro. Sin embargo, debes de reconocer que la renuncia de Miró Cardona fue un rejuogo de Castro para ocupar el puesto de primer ministro. Castro no quiere a nadie en el gobierno que no esté de acuerdo con él y sus proyecciones políticas.*³

Look, I understand that the majority, including you, supports Castro. Yet, you must recognize that Miró Cardona's resignation was part of a ploy by Castro to take over as prime minister. Castro does not want anyone in the government who does not agree with him and his political ideology.

What she says sounds possible. However, Castro is not what interests me on this crisp night. Marina occupies my mind.

During the next eighteen months we spend many hours together. Our passion erupts. Castro's revolution blooms. Castro is in complete control. Dissent is doomed. Internal opposition appears futile. Castro does not tolerate dissent. To avoid internment or the firing squad, a large number of Castro's opponents depart. Before my eyes, a nation of immigrants

³ After Batista's departure, a provisional government took power with a "social democratic" orientation and little hint of communist influence. Miró Cardona, a former Castro's professor at the University, became prime minister. Under pressure, on February 13, he resigned. Castro took over as prime minister (Levine, 2001, pp. 28-29). Miró Cardona disagreed with Castro over restoring the death penalty and making legal penalties retroactive (Thomas, 1998, p. 1197).

turns into one of emigrants. The lack of tolerance for opposing views becomes virulent. My support for Castro begins to falter.

I'm ready to drop Marina off for the night when I decide to tell her about my decision to leave, go into exile. We sit in my car which is parked next to one of the sidewalks facing *El Aire Libre*, an open-air restaurant occupying the first floor of the three-story building situated on the southeast corner of *Avenida 23 y Calle 12*, one of the busiest intersections in *el Vedado* section of *La Habana*. Marina lives with her aunt in a one-bedroom apartment on the third floor.

¡No me vas a dejar aquí! [You are not going to leave me here!] Marina exclaims when I tell her I obtained a visa at the American Embassy and will leave for the U.S. in the next few days. Her voice conveys the conviction of a person who has seen the future. Her response surprises me. I thought she would want to stay in Cuba, living with her aunt, close to her father and the rest of her family. Besides, I would not be gone very long. Castro would be deposed soon. Or, perhaps, I was not ready to take her with me and give up my independence. My mind was on lust, not on marriage. Or so it seems, thinking about it now.

With my left hand, I pull out a cigarette from a pack in my shirt's left pocket. With my right hand I push in the car's lighter. I stare through the windshield and wait for the lighter to pop. I feel Marina's eyes fixed on the right side of my face. As I light the cigarette, I hear myself mumble,

¿Con quién te vas a quedar en los Estados Unidos?

Who are you going to live with in the U.S.?

¡En West Palm Beach con mis amigos Inés y Toni!

In West Palm Beach with my friends Ines and Toni! Marina snaps back.

The tone of her voice is bellicose; the pitch, sharp. The tension is high. My plans do not include Marina. My plans are to go alone.

No se si podré conseguirte una visa
I do not know if I can get a visa for you.

¡Pues mira, es mejor que mires que vas a hacer!
Well, it would be better if you see what can be done!

As she finishes her remark, Marina opens the car door and steps out. Her right hand holds the car door open. Her eyes are fixed on mine.

¡Yo aquí no me voy a quedar sola!
I'm not going to stay here by myself!

Marina's left index finger is extended. She moves it slowly from left to right a couple of times, turns around, closes the door behind her, and walks towards the entrance leading to the stairs to her apartment. Her movements are slow, deliberate. The next day, I am back at the American Embassy. This time Marina is with me. When we leave, we both have visas. My future changes forever!

* * * *

Tampa, Florida
February 14, 2003

¿Qué tal les fue en el médico?
How did things go at the doctor's? Sabina asks as I unlock the black wrought iron door guarding the entrance to mother's kitchen.

Bien. . .
Well. . .

As I respond Sabina walks over to the stove to make sure the dark Cuban brew completes

its journey and settles in the top part of the brewing machine. Half an hour earlier the doctor placed a band-aid over the stitches he inserted on the right side of mother's nose.

. . . ahí traje pan cubano, croquetas de jamón y dos pedazos de chicharrones de puerco.

. . . I brought Cuban bread, ham croquettes, and two pork crackling fingers. I tell Sabina as I hold the door opened for mother to come in.

As Sabina places my cup of coffee on top of the kitchen table, I notice a copy of *La Gaceta*, a trilingual—English, Español and Italiano—weekly newspaper published in Tampa's Ybor City, dated February 14, 2003. As I flip through the pages, I notice the bold letters in a full-page ad

. . . the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners to honor Mayor Dick Greco with the Hillsborough County Moral Courage Award in recognition of his historic trip to Cuba . . . from those who were proud to witness Mayor Greco's finest moment. . . His motives were humanitarian and his effort moved us one step closer to a day when Americans and Cubans can once again be friends. . . [original emphasis] (p. 13).

Greco's smiling face adorns the upper center section of the page. His white teeth jump off the page. His wide-open eyes look down at me. He exults satisfaction, confidence of a job well done. My eyes move to the bowl at the center of the table. Images of the Cuba I left reappear, a Cuba where Americans and Cubans were friends. I hear the background music Sabina has on, the same music they played at that New Year's eve party almost forty-five years ago. . .

* * * *

***31 de diciembre de 1958
La Habana, Cuba***

*Quiéreme mucho
dulce amor mío
que amante tuyo
siempre seré. . .*
Love me forever
sweet love of mine
that your lover
forever I'll be. . .

Couples move in unison to the melodic voice embedded in the musical sounds coming from the orchestra playing at *Tropicana* [a night club on the outskirts of Havana] under the stars of a clear Cuban night. We are only two hours away from the arrival of the New Year. As I walk into the main dining area, Arturito, a childhood friend, and our dates, Ana and Julia, follow me. Humberto, a fellow student, waits with Gloria at a table adjacent to the dance floor. Royal palm trees surround the area. Humberto and Gloria wear big smiles on their faces. During dinner they talk about their recent engagement and their plans to attend school in the U.S. following their wedding.

Moments after the arrival of the New Year, I notice Humberto's father, a member of Batista's armed forces, as he approaches our table. Armed soldiers follow close behind. He embraces Humberto and whispers into his right ear. We cannot hear. As his father moves back, Humberto nods.

¡Feliz Año Nuevo!
Happy New Year!

The father calls out to the rest of our group. He wears a big smile. He waves his right hand, turns, and walks away. The soldiers follow close behind.

* * * *

In much the same way he had taken power under the secrecy of darkness, Batista gives up control of Cuba during the first hours of the New Year. He flies to Santo Domingo following the refusal of many members of the Cuban armed forces, fed up with corruption, to continue fighting. Their action is preceded by the U.S. government's refusal to sell more armaments to Batista nine months earlier, their belief in Castro's promise for a general amnesty and return to the 1940 Constitution, and the media driven image of Castro as the Cuban *messiah* led by *New York Times* reporter Herbert Mathews who wrote,

He has strong ideas of liberty, democracy, social justice, the need to restore the Constitution, to hold elections (Geyer, 1991, p. 169).

based on Castro's claims that

We are fighting for a democratic Cuba and an end to the dictatorship (Geyer, 1991, p. 169).

* * * *

As far back as I can remember, on the eve of every January 6, many Cuban families participated in the celebration of the *Día de los Reyes Magos*, in memory of the day three wise men visited a child born in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. Children left food to feed the wise men's camels. The following morning, as if by magic, the food was gone. Gifts appeared in its place. However, the eve of January 6, 1959 finds us, instead, celebrating Castro's slow march through *Santa Clara* on his way to a triumphal entry into Havana that would rival the best Roman tradition. Two days later, during his first speech in Havana, Castro, like Caesar, promises freedom. In return, we pledge allegiance to the "freedom fighter" coming down from the top of

the highest Cuban mountain range followed by his “twelve apostles.” We stand shoulder to shoulder in the heart of *Campamento Libertad* [Freedom Camp],⁴ a few blocks from *la panadería Reina*, the bakery where seven years earlier I stood next to my father and heard words that did not make sense to me.

. . . *tumbaron al gobierno de Prío. Batista dio un golpe de estado.* .
. . . Prío’s government was toppled. Batista forged *a coupe d’état*.

Today, I understand their meaning. I am overwhelmed by nationalistic feelings. Castro makes us proud to be Cubans. We perceive “him as a true charismatic figure, as the chosen leader who had, and was fulfilling, an historic mission” (Gonzalez, 1974, p. 95). We anoint him *líder máximo*. In return, Castro promises free elections, a return to the Constitution of 1940, justice for every Cuban. His fervor is angelical; his rhetoric, passionate. A crucifix hangs from his neck. A white pigeon rests on his shoulder when he asks the crowd,

¿Armas para qué?
Arms for what?

¿Para qué las necesitamos?
Why do we need them? I ask myself.

¡No las necesitamos!
We don’t need them! I exclaim to myself.

We agree with Fidel. Elections will take place in a few months. All weapons must be

⁴ Cuba’s largest military garrison under Batista was named *Columbia* and later renamed and turned into school grounds by Castro.

turned in. The air is charged with electricity, hope, and love. We are mesmerized. A spiritual calm falls over us. Soldiers from the previous regime remove their caps. Some put their right hands over their hearts, not their weapons, and stand at attention. Others fall to their knees in prayer. Now we know there is a leader devoted to our freedom—a myth is being born before our wondering eyes (Geyer, 1991, p. 207). Soon, however, we discover Castro’s revolution shows no compassion.

* * * *

During the first public trials conducted at the huge Havana Sports Arena, the location matches the spectacle of a Roman circus.

¡Paredón! ¡Paredón! ¡Paredón!
Firing squad! Firing squad! Firing squad!

The crowd’s rising chant rumbles through the audio of our television set.

As I watch, I wonder,

¿Estoy en Roma o en Cuba? ¿Así es como era la inquisición?
Am I in Rome or in Cuba? Is this what the inquisition was like?

Yet, I still believe. To justify what I see, I tell myself,

Son errores, simples aberraciones.
These are just mistakes, aberrations.

In the name of justice, Castro spares no punishment against members of Batista’s regime. Television cameras capture the revolution’s immediate dispensation of justice, execution by firing squad. We are not spared the visual images. A salvo of bullets tears a man's torso. A *coup de*

grâce splatters brains in the air (Franqui, 1981, p. 32).⁵ The victor shows no mercy. Fearful, the conquered is unable to respond in kind and remains silent. Silence becomes the most pure manifestation of our fear.⁶

On May 1st, 1960, Castro publicly attacks the democratic procedures of the past and questions the need for elections. On June 27th, Castro claims, “He who is an anticommunist is a counterrevolutionary” (Horowitz, 1995, p. 47). Later that summer, to rest from the constant changes taking place, Marina and I decide to go away for a few days and take the ferry from *Batabano* to *Isla de Pinos* [Isle of Pines]. The quiet and romantic island South of Havana is an ideal spot to spend time alone together. After our return, I receive a phone call from a co-worker.

El gobierno nacionalizó la compañía esta mañana. ¡Necesitas regresar al trabajo enseguida!

The government nationalized the company this morning. You need to return to work immediately.

His voice is an emotionless monotone. I respond in a defiant tone,

¡Estoy de vacaciones! ¡Regresaré cuando terminen mis vacaciones!

I am on vacation. I will be back whenever my vacation is over!

As I hang up the phone, a multitude of thoughts cram into my mind.

¿Me llamó de su propia iniciativa? ¿Trató sencillamente de ser amistoso e informarme lo que pasaba? Nunca fue amistoso antes. ¿Alguien le dijo que me llamara para ver cual era mi reacción? ¿Qué sucede ahora?

Did he call out of his own initiative? Was he trying to be friendly and informative? He was never friendly before. Did someone tell

⁵ Years later, a similar picture coming out of Vietnam rekindles my memories of such an event.

⁶ To Arroyo Naranjo silence is the most pure manifestation of fear in Cuba (pp.60-63).

him to call me and report my reaction? What happens now?
Unable to make sense of what happened, I continue to ask myself questions.

*Esto no tiene sentido. ¿Saben lo que están haciendo? ¿Les importa?
¿Le importara a alguien? ¿Serán realmente comunistas? No, no lo
creo. ¡No entiendo!*

It doesn't make sense. Do they know what they are doing? Do they
care? Does anyone care? Are they really communists after all? No.
I do not believe it. I don't understand!

I argue with myself. I do not recognize the divergence of our rationalities. I do not yet
know reason is never neutral (Shweder, 1991). Ideology always informs reason. Castro's
opposition to U.S. capitalism engenders his own brand of nationalism. Castro's ideology
demands government control of all means of production and communication (Szulc, 1995). Castro
hastily institutes his *sui generis* brand of nationalism and demands collective obedience (Cabrera
Infante, 1992). As *de facto* and absolute leader of the social changes taking place in Cuba, Castro
announces

Con la Revolución todo, contra la Revolución, nada.
Within the revolution everything, against the revolution nothing
(Franqui, 1966, p. 271).

meaning

*...que la Revolución era Fidel y sus gustos estéticos y literarios
y sus decisiones políticas.*
... that the revolution was Fidel and his aesthetic and literary
tastes and his political decisions (p. 271).

I did not yet understand that Castro's ideology informed his reason and differs from the
one informing mine. As our divergent rationalities collide, my body trembles. My hands perspire.
My heart races. Fear penetrates my body. What is happening does not make sense. I do not find

logic in Castro's actions. I am not aware of Castro's letter where he declared his intention to carry on a war against the Americans (p. 338).

I disagree with certain actions taken by Castro, but I am still enthusiastic about Cuba's future. Castro's lack of candor and his ideological bent are not obvious to me, perhaps due to my nationalistic fervor. But, now I don't know what is going to happen. I feel confused, perhaps betrayed. Doubts fill my mind.

*¿Qué voy hacer? ¿Me voy? ¿Si me voy, para donde? ¿Cómo?
¿Por qué tiempo?*
What am I going to do? Do I leave? If so, where to? How? For how long?

In the days that follow, my mind continues to race at breakneck speed. As the reality of the government's intervention sinks in, I start to realize that Castro's actions are not good for the country. Now I begin to believe that his actions will destroy Cuba's economy. I thought things would be different. I never thought I would contemplate leaving my home, my country. I am living a nightmare. My mind refuses to accept the reality of the moment. What I see, I do not see. What I hear, I do not hear. I find it difficult to understand what is taking place. The ideological shift taking place in Cuba leaves me confused. My world crumbles before my eyes.

Finally, my belief in Castro's promises shatters, but I am afraid to express my concerns to anyone. Castro's government does not tolerate dissent. I call Pruessman, the general manager of Goodyear de Cuba, S.A. I started working at Goodyear just a short time before he arrived from Argentina. We developed a good rapport. I figured that he might help me obtain a transfer to Central or South America. Triay, the office manager, was earlier transferred to Venezuela; Bobes,

the credit manager, to the Philippines. I did not want to go to the Philippines. It is too far away from Cuba.

“Meet me at the side entrance of the Embassy tomorrow at ten in the morning,”

Pruessman tells me after listening to my request. When I hang up, my mind is in turmoil.

¿Qué le digo a Marina, a mis padres? Los viejos nunca expresaron dudas sobre mis decisiones. ¿Las expresaran ahora? Lo dudo. ¿Pero cómo puedo estar seguro? ¿Qué sucederá con mis estudios ahora que estoy en mi último año? ¿Cuándo terminaré? ¿Qué hago con el carro? No debo preocuparme. ¡No estaré fuera por mucho tiempo!

What do I tell Marina, my parents? They have never questioned my decisions before. Will they question this one? I doubt it. But how can I be sure? What about my studies now that I'm in my last year of college/ When will I finish? What do I do with my car? I should not be concerned. I will be back soon!

Even though at the time I know I must leave, I do not think about it in terms of exile. I do not realize the “history of an exile does not begin the day we leave the country, but on the day we feel the country has abandoned us” (Cámara, p. 151).

A few days later, when I return to work, I discover the government had appointed a shoemaker to head the company. Though I never met him before, he greets me with a pep talk.

¡Cotanda, tú sabes que este es el gobierno del pueblo! La compañía ahora nos pertenece. Tenemos que trabajar más duro. ¡Tenemos que brindarnos de voluntarios para protegerla!

Cotanda, you know that this is the government of the people. The company now belongs to us. We must work harder. We must volunteer to protect it!

He is a long time member of *el Partido Socialista Popular de Cuba* [Cuba's Communist Party]. I fear expressing my thoughts and beliefs like never before, a reaction to the prevailing

attitude displayed by Castro and his avid sympathizers, who believe any expression of disagreement is a counter-revolutionary act, an act of treason.

The pressure to "volunteer" for service in *la milicia* [the neighborhood militia] is now unbearable. A year earlier, when the militia was formed, the pressure to "volunteer" came from the union representing Goodyear's workers, not the managers representing the company. Now, the government manages Goodyear. Hence, the pressure now comes from management and the union. It is always present. The pressure suffocates me. Anyone who does not volunteer is presumed to be against the government and, therefore, against the people. You are guilty until proven innocent. The company was taken from its owners without compensation. Thus, I cannot bring myself to believe that the company is "mine." I no longer identify with Castro's revolution or the company. Later, when a co-worker asks,

*¿Cómo puedes negarte de voluntario para proteger la compañía?
Ahora nos pertenece. ¿Estás en contra de nosotros?*
How can you refuse to volunteer to protect the company? It now
belongs to us. Are you against us?

I am nervous, but snap back,

¡La compañía no me pertenece a mí y no te pertenece a ti!
The company does not belong to me anymore than it belongs to
you!

Now, I am scared. News about imprisonment and disappearance of members of Castro's inner circle fuel my imagination.⁷ My fear increases. Marina's insights are confirmed: Castro's

⁷ *Hubert Matos and Camilo Cienfuegos held the highest rank in Castro's army, comandantes. Hubert Matos was jailed following his resignation after a disagreement with Castro over the role members of Cuba's Communist Party should play in Cuba's new government. He spent twenty years in jail. Camilo Cienfuegos disappeared when flying back*

positions are not to be questioned by anyone, not even Castro's top echelon. If you dare, you are demonized as a counter revolutionary. You may be arrested and languish in jail or mysteriously disappear. My concerns for my safety and possible incarceration increase. Fear surrounds me, penetrates my body, and settles inside me. Fear becomes a constant companion. I can't shake it.

* * * *

Tampa, Florida
February 14, 2003

Mother's voice brings me back.

. . . tres imágenes nunca se me borran de mi mente: mis tres nietas con sus vestiditos azules y zapaticos blancos recibíndome en el aeropuerto de Tampa, el verdor de los cañaverales cubanos desde el aire cuando yo me iba y las espaldas de Dionel y Marina cuando caminaban hacia el avión en Cuba. . .

. . . three memories are always in my mind: my three granddaughters in their little blue dresses and white shoes waiting for me at the Tampa airport, the vivid green color of the Cuban sugar fields from the air as I left, and Dionel and Marina's backs as they walked to the plane in Cuba. . .

I realize she is talking to Sabina. My eyes are still fixed on the earth-colored bowl. This is not the first time I hear mother tell this story. As time goes on, departure and absence define her memories. Every time mother tells the story, tears slowly run down her cheeks. When I see her tears, I've to fight hold mine back. Her words always rekindle my memories of a day deeply embedded in my memory, my own departure.

* * * *

to Havana after arresting Hubert Matos. No traces of Cienfuegos, the plane's pilot, or the plane were ever found. No distress signal was received.

8 de octubre de 1960
La Habana, Cuba

October 8, 1960 is a dry, cool morning. Yet, I perspire. The dry coolness of the early morning air announces the departure of a hot and humid summer. Our arrival at Rancho Boyeros airport announces our departure. A few days earlier, Pruessman sent a message advising that I report to work at Goodyear's downtown Tampa store by October 10.

Two young guards wearing crumpled olive-green army fatigues and unkept beards denote no emotion as they thoroughly search through Marina's luggage and my two, newly bought suitcases sitting on the table in front of them. Bold letters in a large sign behind them quote José Martí, Cuba's independence apostle.

Sólo los cobardes abandonan La Patria
Only cowards abandon the motherland.

I look at Marina. She looks at me. I try to tell her I feel confused. I can't. Thoughts of staying enter my mind.

¿Es esto lo que debo hacer? ¿Debo quedarme? ¿Soy un cobarde porque me voy?
Am I doing the right thing? Should I stay? Am I a coward for leaving?

I struggle with the idea of staying. I push the thought away. I am nervous, but try to appear calm as questions continue to crowd my mind.

¿Me encontrarán los papeles de inmigración o los \$65US dentro de mi cámara? ¿Qué sucederá si los encuentran?
Will they find my U.S. immigrations papers or the \$65US inside my camera? If they do, what will happen?

Inside the *pecera* [fishbowl] (a nickname for the glass enclosure where passengers are

kept waiting to board the plane after being searched), I try to play the role of a tourist, but become restless and knock a freestanding ashtray to the floor. Sand scatters over everywhere. My hands begin to perspire. I know I tremble, but tell myself I am calm. With Marina's help, I attempt to clean the mess as if nothing happened. Yet, I know everyone is staring at me. As I talk to myself, I feel their eyes on me.

¡Limpia el reguero que has hecho! ¡Contrólate! ¡Se van a dar cuenta que estás escondiendo algo!
Clean the mess you have made! Control yourself! They are going to realize you are hiding something!

I tremble and try to hide my fear. Slowly, I begin to lift the ashtray from its unusual position. I stop at the sound of a loud voice,

¡Dionel Cotanda!

The sound of my name comes through the huge loudspeakers staring at me from each corner of the *pescera*.

¡Oh no! I silently exclaim.

Suddenly, I realize mine is not the only name being called. I realize they are calling the names of those they want to board the plane leaving for Miami.

Huuuu . . .

I breathe deeply, feeling relieved.

I enter the plane behind Marina. I sit next to her. I sit by the window. Marina wants the aisle seat. She does not want to look out the window. Slowly, or so it seems now, the rest of the passengers fill the plane. There is not an empty seat. Kennedy has yet to break relations with

Castro. Cuban and U.S. commercial air carriers fly in and out of Cuba daily. Each flight is full. I move close to Marina and whisper,

¡Todo el mundo se va de Cuba!
Everyone is leaving Cuba!

As she nods, I tell myself,

¡Qué bonita y tranquila luce!

How calm and beautiful she looks!

Our first encounter pops into my mind. Our sixteen-month courtship flashes by, her calmness as our parents said *Adiós* [good bye]. I have mixed emotions about her trip to the U.S. Perhaps because it was her decision, not mine. I know she will be with her friends in West Palm Beach. But I don't know what to expect. Since I believe we will return to Cuba soon, I push the thoughts away.

¿Cuándo levantaremos vuelo? ¿Me llamarán para que regrese a la terminal? ¿Por qué no levantamos vuelo?
Will we ever take off? Will they call me back to the terminal? Why don't we take off?

I am restless. Suddenly, the plane begins to race down the runway. As it lifts, I look out the window and ask myself,

¿Qué tiempo estaré afuera?
How long will I be gone?

When I arrive in Miami, my belief of a quick return is reinforced. Troops train in Guatemala to invade Cuba. I tell myself,

¡Regresaré en unos pocos meses!
I'll return in a few months!

I am certain the growing number of Cubans disenchanted with Castro will unite in a common effort to overthrow his regime and provide a political environment conducive to the unimpeded exercise of freedom of expression; the freedom of expression without fear of retaliation that Castro vehemently promised when he came to power.

The magnitude of my decision to leave Cuba is not evident at the time. I do not realize that *¡Regresaré en unos pocos meses!* [I'll return in a few months!] is wishful thinking, that it will become a departure without return. I do not foresee that the U.S. will be home to my daughters and the final resting place to my grandfather, my father, and my father-in-law. I do not anticipate that Marina and I will create a family, that our interactions will turn into a life-long relationship deeply entrenched in the U.S.

An unrealized future is now my past and my present. More than forty years later, memories of my lived experiences in Cuba flash in front of me and point to a different future that might have been. My memories make me question who I am, where I belong. . .

* * * *

Tampa, Florida
February 14, 2003

Mother's voice breaks through my memories.

Sabina, ¿quién trajo el periódico?
Sabina, who brought the paper?

My eyes move away from the earth colored, ceramic bowl and land on Greco's smiling face
as Sabina responds.

¡Bustamante, cuando dejó tu almuerzo!
Bustamante, when he left your lunch!

My eyes move away from Greco's smiling face. I fold *La Gazeta* and place it next to the bowl. I finish sipping my cup of Cuban coffee, walk towards mother, and hand her the paper.

Vieja ahí tienes algo acerca de Castro para leer luego.
Mother, here is something about Castro for you to read later.

Sabes que no me interesa oír su nombre. Su gente asesinaron a tu tío frente a su hijo. ¡Nunca se lo perdonaré!
You know I'm not interested in hearing his name. His followers murdered your uncle, while his son watched. I'll never forgive him!

I keep forgetting that mother now becomes upset whenever she hears Castro's name. I mumble an apology, kiss her forehead, place the empty cup in the sink, and turn to Sabina.

Sabina, déjale la curita puesta en la cara a la vieja hasta mañana.
Me voy.
Sabina, leave the band aid on mother's face till tomorrow. I'm leaving.

I walk out the door and into my car. As I pull away from mother's driveway, an academic voice seizes my mind.

* * * *

Reflections

In an attempt to understand not only my experiences leading to my departure, but also to make sense of my exile, my relationship with my mother and my wife, I use an autoethnography as a form of inquiry (Richardson, 1994; Ellis, 2004). I draw on memory to relive my interactions with my mother and my wife together with my experiences before my arrival to the U.S. I use autoethnography not only to make sense of my experiences then, but also now. I know I am a

reluctant immigrant. I left Cuba to maintain my freedom to dissent without fear of retaliation. My experience is part of a collective Cuban unconsciousness influenced by historical tendencies of *exceptionalism*, *diversity*, and *secularism*—major historical tendencies I cannot escape.

Three major historical tendencies, *exceptionalism*, *diversity*, and *secularism*, embedded in Cuban culture, shed light on our tendency to define ourselves as exiles, reluctant immigrants (Grenier & Pérez, 2003, p. 16). *Exceptionalism* is a shared perception that Cubans' national experience is different from that of any other people. For Cubans, this "sense of uniqueness is elevated to the point where it is a defining national characteristic" (p. 30). *Diversity* emerges from the contribution of many "other cultures to the intricacies of the Cuban culture mostly as the result of migration to the island during the first half of the twentieth century. . . [and] the pervasive influence of U.S. culture" (p. 40). *Secularism* and the absence of fatalism, values honed from a-centuries-old commercial port culture, lead us to believe that we can control our destiny. Our lives are in our own hands (p. 42). These three historical tendencies influence the lives of Cubans inside and outside the island nation, Cuba and its diaspora. They influence who I am.

Exceptionalism and secularism fuel Cubans struggle between the politics of passion and the politics of affection (Fernández, 2000). The politics of passion is the crusade for absolute moral ends for the community at large—the moral imperative of the state to change the reality of *what is* to *what ought to be*. The politics of affection is "an instrumental and affective logic that justifies breaking the norms of the state to fulfill personal needs (material and otherwise) as well of those loved ones" (p. 1). Both, the politics of passion and the politics of affection, provide Cubans space to articulate meaning and identity. The politics of passion form the base for a formal

relationship between the government and its citizens. The politics of affection fuels an informal relationship among the citizens faced with the reality of *what is*. The politics of passion seek a bond between ruler and the ruled. The politics of affection undermines the relationship. The battle for these two polar opposites rallied Cubans around Castro, a charismatic leader, and set the stage for disconnection when the grand goal never fully materialized (back cover). Exile, an expression of an unfulfilled goal, became one of the means to express the disconnection. As a result, emigration turned into the “most visible a recurring manifestation of the Cuban saga over the past four decades . . . a political tool” (Grenier & Pérez, 2003, p.22).⁸

An exile is one who, unable to vote at the ballot box, votes with his feet. Exile means emigration: displacement, departure from geographical markers anchoring a history that tells us who we are. Exile defines our identity. Loose from my moorings, like other reluctant immigrants, my search for identity is an attempt to ascertain the boundaries that encompass who I am, where I belong (Cotanda, 2001b). Memory becomes the reservoir of my *Cubanismo*.⁹ While mental as well as bodily considerations are involved in questions of collective and individual identities, the most important single feature is *memory* (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 23). As an exile, the pain I feel,

⁸ Greiner & Pérez also argue that during the 1800's a large number of emigrants from the island of Cuba arrived in the U.S. as “reluctant immigrants” due to the autocratic nature of Spanish rule and defined themselves as exiles. Felix Varela is mentioned as arriving in 1823; Jose Marti, in 1880 (pp. 16-17).

⁹ To Arregui (1995), the search for identity—the questions “Who am I?” and “Where do I belong?”—has been and still is a very important determining factor in the art of many young “American-Cuban, Cuban-American” artists. Arregui is the curator for the art exhibition “American-Cuban, Cuban-American, thirty five,” where five Cuban artists and one first generation U.S. born artist explore “their Cuban roots and their new American identity.” He claims, “the core of their roots is their Cubanismo” (Milani 1995). Cubanismo is the core of Cuban exiles’ roots, “an inner feeling” (Colmenero, 1985, p. 6). Cubanidad refers to the bond of being born in Cuba and identity as a member of the Cuban nation. Cubanismo refers to a particular way of being regardless of birthplace. Fernández and Cámara Betancourt use “lo cubano” to refer to “our inapprehensible sense of belonging to an island, a nation, its culture(s), and its histories” (p. 5).

while individual, is also a collective pain, one felt by many others. I am familiar with the circumstances oppressing Cubans. Injustice becomes the collective self ever present in me. As an exile, regardless of my personal freedom and economic success, I will not be satisfied until Cuba enjoys the liberty and justice lost when Castro assumed absolute power (Aguilar León, 1991, pp. 104-105). This collective memory, like all memory, is constructive and becomes a crucial element in maintaining my sense of integrity (Clifford, 1992, p. 115).

In other words, I realize that as long as I define myself as *an exile*, I will remain a “reluctant immigrant,” one awaiting “the opportunity to return and recover the island from the political order that compelled” me to leave (Grenier & Pérez, 2003, p.16). On the other hand, if I define myself as *an immigrant*, I must abandon the exile status and give up my collective pain—my Cuban identity, my I will not belong to either Cuban nation, not to Cuba and not to the Cuba in exile (Rieff, 1993, p. 40). Yes, I understand that I left Cuba to maintain my freedom to dissent without fear, but as a *Cuban*, not to be an *American* or a *Cuban-American*, a hyphenated *American*.¹⁰ I know mine was a futile act of self-definition (Cotanda, 2001b). I also know I will continue to identify as an exile even if it turns out to be another futile act of self definition. Relations of power historically determined constitute my identity (Visweswaran, 1994, p. 8). I write to make sense of my decision to leave Cuba, to move out what is inside me, analyze it, and then bring it back in again in some order that makes some sense to me. However, deep down inside, I know I can never fully make sense of who I am. Mine will always be “an undefined

¹⁰Pérez Firmat (1994) claims, “Cubans have always been hyphenated Americans” (p. 16).

borderland,” one full of porous categories, shifting meanings, multiple voices (Ellis, 2004, pp. 162-165). Mine is an unfinished story from a reluctant immigrant caught between the politics of passion and affection. Indeed, a day does not go by in which my decision to leave Cuba does not jump in front of me and demands that I look at and examine it. Daily, I face the memories of friends and relatives I’ll never see again. What could I have done differently? Should I have?

Every time I enter mother’s kitchen, my mind drifts to Cuba. I hear voices. I hear mother’s struggles not to forget. As I sit at mother’s kitchen table, memories abound forcing me to confront who I am, what my past means to me. I hear voices that won’t let me forget. I struggle with many memories, too many voices popping in and out of my mind. Slowly, mother’s mind is deteriorating. She forgets. I remember.

After mother dies, she wants me to keep her house and let relatives live in it. Does she want her house to serve as a conduit to family continuity, an attempt to keep the family together, provide continuity to a life close to an end, a way to hang on? However, once she is gone, I’m not sure I want to continue to listen to the voices at mother’s kitchen. I am not sure I want to continue to struggle with the memories. I am not sure I want to continue to be tied to the umbilical chord, mother’s kitchen table. But, do I have a choice?

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